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DEATH OF ANANIAS.

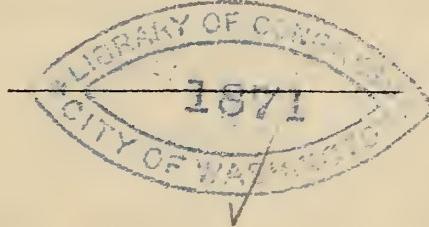
THE STORY  
OF  
ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA.

BY WILLIAM A. ALCOTT.

REVISED BY THE EDITOR,

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*with*



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## PREFACE.

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SOME may think that the story of Ananias and Sapphira is exclusively adapted to the instruction of adults, and that to direct the attention of children to it is a mistake in judgment. But I think quite otherwise. I am fully confident that a careful perusal of the following account of their sad fall, and terrible punishment, will lead to the conviction that its warnings are designed by the Holy Spirit for all who are old enough to distinguish right from wrong ; and that to all such individuals, however young, the story will be found profitable.

THE AUTHOR.



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THE STORY  
OF  
ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA.

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CHAPTER I.

WHO ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA WERE.

THE Bible mentions several persons by the name of Ananias. Among these are Ananias a high-priest, Ananias of Damascus, and Ananias the husband of Sapphira. The last is the most remarkable.

Ananias, the husband of Sapphira, was one of the first five thousand Christian believers; and next to Judas the first known hypocrite and apostate. He appears to have resided at or near Jerusalem, and to have been a man

of some distinction among his brethren the Jews.

What his occupation was, is not so certain. Some of his possessions we know consisted of land; but this does not by any means prove him to have been a landholder or farmer, according to our modern notions of farming. Small portions of land, only just large enough to set a house upon, are sold every day in our large cities, not by farmers, but by speculators, and indeed by almost all sorts of persons.

I have represented Ananias as being a Jew. How is it known, the reader may perhaps ask, that he was a Jew rather than a Gentile, since there were many Gentiles living at Jerusalem? My reply will be this.

Because the gospel was first preached to the Jews, and no Gentile was

considered as having any concern with it. Had Ananias and Sapphira been Gentiles, the circumstance of their conversion would have been mentioned, as that of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, was.

Some few conjectures will be mentioned hereafter concerning the character of these remarkable associates in crime: for the present we will proceed with their singular history.

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## CHAPTER II.

### ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA SELL THEIR PROPERTY.

AMONG the twelve apostles of Christ was one traitor, Judas Iscariot. Is it then to be wondered at, that among the first five thousand disciples there were two more who made false professions, Ananias and Sapphira? Is it not a

wonder rather that more are not mentioned?

At this early period of the history of Christianity it was customary for the disciples to sell a part or all of their property, and put it in a common treasury, for the relief of those who had nothing, or who had less than themselves. This holding property in common began, it would seem, with the travelling companions of Christ, of whom Judas was the treasurer or depositor.

The friends or acquaintances of the hypocritical Ananias and Sapphira were selling their property of various kinds, to be deposited in a public treasury; and Ananias, who wished to put on every external mark of discipleship, sold his.

We are not indeed told that he sold

all he had. The Bible only says, he "sold a possession." It may have been a small estate ; it may have been a large one. It may have been all he owned in the world ; or it may have been a part only. From the tenor of the story, however, I am inclined to believe he sold all that he had, at least all he had of landed estate.

The money which he received, in conformity with the custom which then prevailed, was, in the language of the Bible, "laid at the apostles' feet," by which is meant, that it was placed at their disposal. They were the treasurers ; and they were worthy to be so. Perhaps the terrible fall of Judas had taught the first converts to Christianity the danger of trusting men known to be covetous with the property of others.

Of the extent of the possessions Ananias parted with not a word is said, nor is it important we should know. The facts which are brought out concerning him are the same, and the lessons of instruction to us are the same, whether he parted with hundreds, thousands, or millions.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### KEEPING BACK PART OF THE PRICE.

I HAVE said that Ananias brought the money for which he sold his land, and placed it in the public treasury kept by the apostles. But I have gone a little too fast, for he only brought a part of it. How great a part does not appear, perhaps it was a very *small* part.

The deceit which he attempted to

practise in this transaction was a great sin, as will appear in the next chapter, and as we know from the consequences which followed. Whether the sum retained was great or small made not so much difference ; the spirit which was manifested was not the spirit of Christ, it was the spirit of Judas, and of his instigator, Satan.

Suppose, if the supposition is a fair one, that Christ himself had sold the land ; or if we find it difficult to think of the Saviour as having anything to do with property, suppose it was Peter, or John, or James, or Andrew. Do you believe, can you for a single moment believe, that either of these men would have kept back part of the price of land which they had sold, and pretended that a part of it was the whole ?

But Ananias did this, and did it

boldly. He persisted, moreover, when an inquiry was made by Peter, in the assertion that he had done right, and that he had really brought the whole sum of money which he had received for the land. His wife joined with him in his wickedness, and was not long separated from him in his punishment.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE PUNISHMENT.

SUDDEN death always shocks us ; and it was no doubt the intention of Divine Providence that it should do so. To the young, however, it is more shocking, much more so, than to those who have lived longer in the world.

When I was less than four years and a half old, a neighbour of my father —a schoolmaster—in felling

a tree, was suddenly crushed under it. The news spread immediately; and I saw the discoloured body. The impression made then has never been effaced, nor would it be if I were to live half a century longer.

Another neighbour, sitting in his chair, before the fire-place, just at the close of a thunder shower, was struck dead, in an instant, with the lightning. This scene of sudden death, too, I shall remember as long as I live.

Sudden death from anger and other mental causes is by no means uncommon. Several great, I will not say good, men, whom I could name, have fallen and died in an instant, when under the influence of violent anger. The heart, or some large blood-vessel, or a sack of blood formed by the bursting of a vessel some time

before, suddenly gives way ; and the person is, in a moment, in eternity.

We often hear it said that such or such a person fell dead while in perfect health. This is seldom, if ever, strictly true, except in cases of mere accident. That miracles have sometimes been wrought to take away the lives of those who were in perfect health, no one will dispute ; and it is certainly possible that such things sometimes happen in these days.

But in general, when people drop dead in a moment, there is a natural cause for it. Some internal, deep-seated organ was diseased, and may have been so a long time. It may be one organ or part, it may be another. Even when people die suddenly from anger, or any other passion, there is usually some weak vessel or part

which the violence of the mental emotion causes to give way.

But I was to speak in this chapter of the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira. They appear to have been in health at the time of which we are speaking. They could buy and sell, and contrive ; and with the rest, contrive mischief. They could put their heads together to do evil ; as if, because no human eye saw them, it would not be found out.

But they are suspected by Peter, and he declares his suspicion. Not, indeed, publicly, or to others ; but privately, as it would seem, to the parties themselves. More, in truth, might be said : Peter most evidently knew they were guilty. He must have had a revelation directly from God on the subject.

“Ananias,” said Peter, “why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?” This was leaving to Ananias no room or time for evasion or excuse. It was charging him so strongly with crime, that the guilty man sunk down at once under it, and expired.

“He fell down,” says the historian Luke, “and gave up the ghost.” Ghost in the Bible often means spirit, and this is its meaning here. He gave up that spirit which Solomon says must return, at the dissolution of the body, to the God who gave it. A dreadful meeting; the meeting of such a spirit as that of Ananias with a God of infinite purity, and exact and equal justice.

Though Sapphira, the wife of Ana-

nias, was accessory to the wicked deed, as it soon appeared, there is no evidence that anybody knew it up to this time, unless it were Peter, and He who revealed to him these terrible facts. She was not with her husband when he came into the house where Peter was ; and, for anything which appears, was utterly ignorant for three hours of what had happened.

Meanwhile, the affrighted multitude, by the hands of their young men, had wound up the body, as too offensive in the sight of God to be permitted to lie long on the surface of the earth, and hastily buried it. This transaction took much of the time above-mentioned, at the expiration of which Sapphira came in.

To her, Peter put at once the heart-searching question, “ Tell me whether

ye sold the land for so much?" viz., for the sum which Ananias had brought to the treasury. She replied in the affirmative, "Yea, for so much." Then said Peter, "How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out."

And as Peter predicted, so it came to pass. The young men at that moment arrived, and Sapphira in the same instant had fallen to rise no more. "The young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband."

Surely it was a day of terrible things at Jerusalem! Surely there was a good reason why fear should fall upon all who saw and heard.

Was it not enough that Jesus the innocent should be crucified, and that there should be darkness, and an earthquake, and the resurrection of departed saints and prophets ? Was it not enough that to these awful scenes should be added the suicidal act of Judas ; and an unholy attempt to turn the maddened and infuriated mob against the peaceable John and the unoffending Peter ? Must there be such abominable hypocrisy, such high-handed treason to the King of heaven, that in the divine plan it was necessary to strike dead the traitors in an instant ?

A recent commentator on the Acts, endeavours to show that there may and must have been a divine interposition here ; yet it is by no means improbable that God may have made

use of natural means or agencies at every step of the process of retribution. He says: "It has occurred in other cases that the consciousness of crime, or the fact of being suddenly detected, has given such a shock to the frame that it has never recovered from it. It is not at all improbable that the shock, in the case of Ananias, was so great as at once to take away his life."

If these views were correct, and if they were equally applicable, as no doubt they would be, to the case of his wife, it would by no means lessen the occasion for belief in a miraculous agency; for could Peter, as has been before intimated, have such a knowledge of secret things as he must have had, both in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, as unhesitatingly to charge them with guilt of the deepest dye?

Still more, how could he dare, on natural principles alone, to fortell the results in the case with such boldness! Was Peter accustomed to such unblushing, such wicked impudence, as to charge on his fellow-men, from bare conjecture, such heinous crimes?

We may be well assured that here was a direct interposition of the Being who will not suffer guilt unrepented of to go unpunished. These sudden inflictions were only a part, a beginning, of the punishment. Ananias and Sapphira still live: death did not extinguish the light of their immortal spirits, though these spirits dwell in darkness.

How can people be found who read the Bible carefully, and yet believe that all our punishment falls upon us in this life? Does death make any

change in the disposition ? Were not Ananias and Sapphira possessed of the same ungodly character on waking in the eternal world, which they carried out of the world in which they had lived ? What should change them but miracle ? Yet, would a miracle be wrought in one moment to make their names a terror to evil doers, and, in the next, another to purify their spirits, and fit them for the immediate presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords ?

There have been those who have laid much blame on Peter in this transaction. They have said that, knowing the laws of the human mind, and the power of fear, he contrived to make such an impression upon the young couple, as at once extinguished life. Others have said that they

fainted, and were by Peter's orders buried alive.

My answer to all this has in part been given. Peter was either an entirely different man from what he had been before, as desperately reckless as he had before been honest and confiding, though sometimes vacillating; or he must have been moved and taught by the direct agency of the Holy Spirit. In the former case, he must have been as successful as he was wicked. He must, moreover, on the same supposition, have become wicked very suddenly, and must have changed back again with almost equal rapidity.

The truth is, Peter, whatever else he may have been, was honest and artless; the last person in the world to lay a plot for deceiving others.

He was under the guidance of God in the matter of Ananias and Sapphira, and not acting a part of his own; and he knew it, and governed himself accordingly.

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## CHAPTER V.

### NATURE OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA'S CRIME.

WE have seen that Ananias and Sapphira came to a most sudden and miserable death, and that this death must have been the consequence of a miraculous interposition of divine Providence. Now then, what was the crime which merited, at the hands of a holy God, such a terrible punishment?

It was not, most clearly, that they kept back part of the money for which they sold their land, for Peter himself

says, “After it was sold, was it not in thine own power?” Customary as it had become with these warm-hearted Christians of the first century to sell whatsoever they had, and have all things common, they were nowhere directly *required* to do it.

True, the young man mentioned in the tenth chapter of Mark was required by the Saviour to sell all his possessions, and give away the avails; but this was evidently designed as a special test of the condition of the young man’s heart, and not as a rule of conduct to be followed by other believers.

In truth, it is not certain that these first followers of Christ, with all their love and zeal, did, in every instance, give up *all* their possessions, and have all things in common. I know it is

often thought so, but the fact cannot, as I think, be proved.

The first and most striking case of having a community of property is that of the very family, so to call it, of our Saviour. They seem, at first, to have had all their property in common stock; and to have made Judas, who loved to be concerned in money matters, their treasurer. Yet Peter, for some time after he was called to the apostleship, appears to have had property at Capernaum; and John, at the crucifixion of the Saviour, evidently had his “own home,” at Jerusalem; and there are other things of the same general import.

And then, in the second case, immediately after the remarkable outpouring of the Spirit, and conversion of three thousand people, on the day

of Pentecost, when “all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need,” it is very far from being certain that every one of them sold everything.

Let us look closely at what is said. Who were they that “sold their possessions and goods?” Were they not “all who believed?” Who were they that had “all things common?” Were they not most certainly the same persons? Who were they that “parted them to all men,” not in equal proportion, nor at once, perhaps, but “as every man had need?” Can there be a doubt that they were the same persons still?

Finally, when it is said, in connection with the story of Ananias and

Sapphira, that “the multitude of them—the five thousand—who believed, were of one heart and one soul, neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common ;” and that “neither was there any among them that lacked, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles’ feet ; and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need,” —the argument remains the same. There is no proof that the property of every individual was *all* sold, nor the shadow of a proof that all was distributed in such a way that no one had more than the rest.

I dwell longer on this point because

there are a numerous class, in our days, who not only insist on the usefulness of having all property in common stock; but also the necessity of having it so. They say the spirit, and some say the letter, of Christianity requires it; and the *latter* point to these passages which I have quoted from Acts for proof.

With this new sect, so to call it, the young all over the face of society will become familiar. It cannot be otherwise. I do not say it is desirable to have it otherwise, if we could. But I *do* say that when the claim is set up by them that they occupy Christian ground in this particular, and the charge made against professors of Christianity that by holding property as individuals they have abandoned the first principles of the

early disciples of Christ, the truth ought to be known.

The crime, then, for which Ananias and Sapphira were smitten, did not consist in withholding their property, for they sold it ; nor merely in withholding a part of it, for they had a perfect right to withhold any part of it, or even the whole, if they chose to do so. “ Religion does not,” as a commentator well says, “ contemplate that men should break up all the arrangements in society ; but it contemplates that those who *have* property should be ready and willing to part with it for the help of the poor and needy.”

Nor did the crime of Ananias and Sapphira consist merely in their telling a falsehood about the matter. I mean to say, that the peculiar heinousness of their crime did not consist in this.

"Thou hast not lied unto men," said Peter, "but unto God." What does he mean to say here? Not that they had not told a lie surely, for they certainly had. Not that lying to men was not wrong, for the Bible throughout condemns it. Our Saviour speaks of the Jews as being like Satan, and as being his children peculiarly, because they were liars. What then, I say again, did Peter mean when he said, "Thou hast not lied unto men?"

Dr. Doddridge's exposition of the passage is as follows: "Thou hast not lied to men alone, to us, or to the church, whose treasurers we are; but to the blessed God himself, who, residing in us by his divine Spirit, is determined to make thee a terrible example of his displeasure."

Here, if Dr. Doddridge is correct,

and I have no doubt of his correctness, is the secret cause of the dreadful exhibition of God's power and justice in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. It was not that they withheld a part of their property, for they had a right to withhold all, or any part of it, or of its avails, after they had sold it. Nor was it that they had told a deliberate and wicked falsehood, bad as this crime was in itself considered. But they had lied to God, they had tempted or tried his Holy Spirit, and herein was their great guilt. Whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost—and, by parity of reasoning, tempts or tries the divine Spirit—commits a heinous crime in the sight of God.

I do not, of course, undertake to say that it was for this sin alone that they were smitten. A boy at school may

be punished for gross profanity. Before swearing he had, indeed, hurt one of his companions very carelessly. On being spoken to, he had denied it; on being reasoned with because he told a lie about it, he had broken out into the most terrible oaths. The teacher, unwilling to let matters go on thus, punishes him severely. Not for injuring his companion slightly, nor for telling a lie. Lying is indeed greatly wrong in the sight of God; but for this, had he stopped here, and been duly humble, he might have been forgiven. But he went further, and swore most wickedly, and his measure of guilt was now full, and his punishment could be delayed no longer. He is punished for swearing, chiefly; and yet I should not dare to say that he is not punished more severely than if, in

addition to his swearing, he had not told a falsehood, or done violence to his neighbour.

I might cite also the more striking case of Peter, at and near the close of his divine Master's life. He had in the first place, in a cowardly manner, run away from him: Then, in addition, he denied him; that is, denied that he knew him. He denied him the second time; nay, even the third time. The last denial was accompanied by an oath. It was now that the eye of Jesus was turned toward him, and Peter wept. He was grieved, doubtless, for the last act, the third denial and the oath, as this was a more grossly wicked act than any of the rest; and yet I suppose he thought of the whole, repented of the whole, and was pardoned for the whole.

Something like this, most undoubtedly, was the condition of Ananias and Sapphira. Though the guilt of lying to the Holy Ghost was the act of deepest dye, yet their whole course of conduct in relation to the whole matter was as base as baseness could be ; and it appears to me always, that it was for the whole that they were punished.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### CONCURRENCE IN CRIME.

WITH regard to the guilt of Ananias and Sapphira, I might say much more than I have said, and still be very far from exhausting the subject. Among the particulars that need further consideration, is the fact of their concurrence in the performance of the same wicked act. Had either of them sin-

ned alone, the case would have been greatly different. Not that their guilt is ever over rated, even when we do not take this circumstance into the account, for it were scarcely possible. All I mean to say is, that however deep their guilt without it, this circumstance renders it still more so. For when two persons join hand in hand to commit a crime, there is every reason for supposing they have reflected on the subject, more or less, instead of plunging headlong into the vortex of guilt in the heat of excitement or passion. There is reason for suspecting there may be more or less of what is sometimes called “malice aforethought” in the matter.

Here were two heads put together to devise mischief, and two pairs of hands found persevering to carry out

the work of mischief their heads had devised. Nor is it, as it might have been, the result of excitement in any degree, for several days had in all probability elapsed before the deed of wickedness which they had unitedly consummated was discovered.

The partaker or receiver of stolen goods is often regarded as equally bad with the thief. But here, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, was something more than all this. They were not only both accessories in the crime, but both, from the nature of the case, principals ; and what I am to show now is, that the guilt of each was greatly increased by their thus acting together, and encouraging each other. But this will appear more clearly when we consider, for a moment, the peculiar guilt of Sapphira.

## CHAPTER VII.

## SPECIAL GUILT OF SAPPHIRA.

I KNOW not but some persons who have read the story of Ananias and Sapphira may have greatly pitied Sapphira, and regarded her as suffering more on account of the sins of her husband than for her own transgressions. For how, say they, could the wife have avoided being connected with her husband in the sin for which both were so suddenly destroyed ?

This question would have more force were it not for the fact that Sapphira, in the present instance, entirely accorded in the fraudulent views and interests of her husband. This is more than probable from the mere statement—"his wife also being privy to

it." But we have positive testimony on the subject.

When Peter came to charge Sapphira with guilt, he said, "How is it that ye have *agreed together* to tempt the Spirit of the Lord?" Peter here takes for granted that she not only assented to the fraud of her husband, but was voluntary in it—agreed to it.

This settles the question of her guilt, at least if we admit, as we already have done, that Peter had a revelation on this subject. More than this, however; her guilt in the transaction, if God had anything to do with it in a miraculous way, was established by her doom.

With these views, our pity for Sapphira, our sympathy with her, I mean, as an ignorant sufferer, will probably soon subside. For though

we may have pity for the worst of criminals, yet is the feeling greatly modified when we come to know that they are greatly guilty. And the guilt of Sapphira, we may rest assured, was of this last description.

The guilt of the husband and wife, who, in the commission of great crimes, act in concert, will appear more plainly when we consider the nature of true friendship, especially that of a wife, mother, or sister.

No true friend who is virtuous will encourage another in doing that which is known to be wrong. Sapphira, therefore, if she knew the transaction was fraudulent, should, as a true friend, such as the marriage connection would imply, have dissuaded her husband from persisting in it; and, above all, should not have joined him

in it. If she could not succeed in her endeavours to make him change his purpose, she ought, at least, to have done her best to do so.

Is it asked, how we know that she did not do her best? I answer, We know it from the whole tenor of the story. We know it particularly from Peter's interrogatories, and from the punishment which fell upon her—her sudden destruction from the presence of her friends and acquaintances, and, as we have reason to believe, from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

But we know it also by inference. Had Sapphira been a good, but misguided woman, Ananias would hardly have dared propose to her his purpose. Is there not at least room to suspect the character of a wife to

whom her husband dares propose a scheme of hypocrisy and fraud—fraud, too, of the most awful kind, fraud against Heaven?

But again. We have great reason to fear for the character of Sapphira as it existed prior to this action, from what may be called her brazen-faced manner. Notice, for example, her reply to Peter's question, "Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yea, for so much."

I have called the words of Peter here a question, but they have more the aspect of a command. Consider the character of Peter. He was now, according to the general belief, a very old man, and a sort of leader—partly, as I suppose, on account of his age—among his brethren, the apostles and Christians. To whom, at this time,

did they look up with reverence—so far at least as the reverence of a human being was to be justified—if not to Peter?

Now suppose the case of a modest woman. Grant that she has been drawn, partly by conjugal authority, and partly otherwise, into some fraudulent scheme of her husband. She is suddenly and boldly addressed by a venerable chief magistrate, as Peter addressed Sapphira. Tell me, now, is the thing so, or so, as your husband states it to be? She is reduced to the dreadful alternative, I know, of either telling a gross falsehood, or of exposing her husband. The latter she may not be willing to do; the former she attempts.

But will there be no misgiving? Will there be no faltering of the voice?

Will there be no lowering of the upper eye-lid? Will there not even be a slight redness of the face; not, perhaps, quite amounting to a blush, but yet very obvious? Will she look up boldly, and answer, “Yes?”

It is an old maxim, and a true one, that

“A shameless woman is the worst of men.”

And if a woman could be found, in a case like that I have supposed above, who would make unblushingly an affirmative, a shameless, reply, it would be in my view little less than positive proof of her debased character.

And yet all this, and even more, was the answer of the wretched Sapphira. Do you ask, what more could be added to the dark catalogue? Sapphira not only said yes, but, without the least apparent hesitation, repeated

over what Peter had before said. “Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much?” said Peter. That is, as I understand it, for the sum before mentioned, perhaps specifying it. She replied, “Yea, for so much;” that is, for the sum mentioned by Peter, whatever it may have been. Suppose Peter said, Tell me whether you sold the land for a thousand shekels of silver? her reply substantially was, Yes, we sold it for a thousand shekels of silver.

Now then, I say again, that there is not one woman in a thousand, if, indeed, one in ten thousand, who can in such a case make such a brazen-faced reply. The whole evidence then is in favour of the belief, that her action in the matter was in accordance with the spontaneous feel-

ings of her own heart, and neither extorted by fear nor excited by the love of her husband.

Had Sapphira been what she should have been, a virtuous woman, and the true friend of Ananias, she might at least have expostulated with him on the guilt of fraud in the sight of God, and especially *against* God ; and if she could not quite succeed, she might at least have had the satisfaction which arises from the consciousness of having done her best. Perhaps, however, she might have done more than this. Perhaps she might, in the language of the apostle James, have “saved a soul from death, and hidden a multitude of sins.”

I have alluded, and barely alluded, to the nature of true friendship, especially that which subsists between

the nearest and dearest relations. I do not, of course, mean to say such as always exists between such relations ; for most unhappily some who bear the name of husband and wife, and parent and child, and brother and sister, do not deserve to be called friends. It is one thing to be called friends, but quite another thing to show ourselves truly friendly.

It is no part of true friendship to suffer those who are near and dear to us to pursue their plans when we know them to be wicked, without so much as a single remonstrance. We should leave nothing undone which it is in our power to do, to prevent them from taking the proposed wrong step. No matter whether their conduct, as they propose it, is to be seen by the world or not, if it is what is obviously

wrong ; for though it should escape the eye of the world, it cannot escape the all-seeing eye of God. Besides, the Christian system is essentially a *do-right system* ; and they who mean to be truly friendly, on Christian principles, must do all in their power to prevent their friends from doing, saying, and thinking wrong. Beyond this, even, must they go. They must do all in their power to induce those with whom they are on terms of intimacy to do right. Above all, must they avoid the awful conduct of Sapphira, who joined in the very crimes which her husband proposed, and thus aided and assisted in bringing down upon both him and herself the awful judgments of offended Heaven.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## HYPOCRISY OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA.

ANANIAS and Sapphira were professing Christians. They had pledged themselves to hate father and mother, and wife and children, and houses and lands, yea, and their own lives also, rather than give up the cause of Christ. In other words, they had pledged themselves to give up the former, whenever their enjoyment came in the way of the enjoyment of the latter.

But as in early times, they were not all Israel who were of Israel, so in later times they are not all Christ's who are of Christ, I mean by profession. It is one thing to put on the appearance, externally, of being the disciple of Christ, and quite another

thing to be really and truly his. One thing more is to be observed here. None are more careful, as a general fact, to put on the externals of religion, than they who are conscious of being destitute of its spirit.

Such, it is quite obvious, were Ananias and Sapphira. They had that love of the world which is incompatible with the love of God; and they knew it. And yet so strong was their attachment to the world, its property, I mean, that they could not and would not relinquish it. To make up, therefore, for that internal conformity to God which I have said they must have been conscious they needed, they were exceedingly careful to put on the appearance of a high degree of conformity externally. While many were selling off a part of their

possessions, and some perhaps all, and depositing the money they received in a common treasury, without the thought of reserving anything to themselves, Ananias and Sapphira undertook to have the name of giving up all, and yet in reality retain something. So they sold all they had, at least I think so; and then, taking only a part of the money, they placed it at the feet of the apostles, and told them it was all they received for the land.

This, I say again, was to secure the credit, Judas-like, of being Christ's without crucifying in the smallest degree their affections and lusts. It was to deceive men, those around them, into the belief of that which was not true. It was to play the hypocrite.

Now there are few crimes which offend God more than hypocrisy. In the days of our Saviour there were few, if any, crimes, that called out his terrible denunciations more quickly. And in the great day of account, few things, it is believed, will be the occasion of a more fearful doom.

When, therefore, we add to the other crimes of Ananias and Sapphira those of perverted and abused friendship, concurrence in crime, and deep and awful hypocrisy, is it any wonder that they were cut down in a moment as cumberers of the ground, and made among the most awful spectacles of transgression and shame that the world ever saw?

Let us, however, take warning. Are there no Ananiases and Sapphiras

among us? Are there none in the Christian church of modern days who endeavour to pass current as disciples of Christ, when they know almost as well as God does, that they are none of his?

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## CHAPTER IX.

### SATANIC AGENCY.

IT is becoming quite fashionable, in these days, to deny that there is any such thing as a personal devil. Satan or devil, they say, is only a personification of all that is evil, a term used for the special accommodation of children and young persons, and perchance some children of larger growth.

But these persons seem to forget that by the same rule of reasoning

away a personal devil, they might go a little further, and reason away a personal Deity. - Indeed, this is exactly the point to which many among us are tending, and to which not a few have already arrived. They who admit the one doctrine, should remember that they are but a step from the admission of the other.

Besides, it ought not to be lost sight of that they who throw aside as childish the belief in the personality of an evil spirit or devil, are at the same time setting aside a doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. I might quote whole pages of texts from this divine book to show that there is not only one principal evil spirit, usually called by way of eminence the devil or Satan ; but as there are numerous good spirits or angels under one principal good

being called God, so there are numerous evil spirits or devils. Even Milton, who was not over careful to keep very close to the Bible, admits that

“ Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth,  
Unseen, both when we wake and while we sleep ;  
These execute their airy purposes,  
And works of love and enmity fulfil.”

But to come back to Ananias and Sapphira, for I cannot well go into a laboured discussion of this subject. There is here particular notice of a personal agent, the devil or Satan, from the mouth of Peter himself : “ Why hath Satan filled thine heart,” says he to Ananias, “ to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land ? ”

Did not Peter believe in the existence and oft-repeated presence of a personal evil agent ? Or was he talking about what he knew had no

existence except in the distempered imaginations of mankind? Could he so impose upon the world as to encourage a belief which he did not himself entertain?

If there was ever an honest man, that man was Peter. Of this I am satisfied, from his whole history. I do not say he was faultless, neither does the Bible. But I do affirm, with boldness, that what he said he meant. He did not talk about an agency which he did not believe in; nor speak of a person—one who went about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he might devour—when he meant no such thing, but only a personification of that which was evil. But Peter only used, in this respect, the language of inspired men generally, and of his and their divine Master.

Satan is represented by Peter as having filled the heart of *Ananias*. This is to invert the order of things with him at the first. It was Eve he first assailed in Eden, not Adam. Here he made his attack on Ananias first. It is not said whether or not he assailed Sapphira afterward, but who can doubt it? Is it possible, was it ever possible, for woman, constituted as she is, to become so much like a demon as Sapphira was without demoniac agency?

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## CHAPTER X.

### RESISTING THE DEVIL.

THE *heart* of Ananias was the point at which Satan made his attack; probably because he knew that to be, in this particular case, the most vul-

nerable. He sometimes fills the mind rather than the heart; at others his influences are directed first to the body. Man, like his Maker, is a trinity, made up of body, soul, and spirit. Each requires to be guarded.

And each of them may be guarded against him. For this we have Scripture encouragement. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," is one of its numerous promises. Do we believe it, and are we governing ourselves accordingly?

This encouragement to resist the devil is particularly applicable to the young. For some reason or other, Satan is exceedingly inclined to make his attacks on the young; perhaps because they are less wary and suspecting. Of the old, moreover, he has less hope, because their habits being

already formed, they are less likely to be active in his service. But by getting possession of the young—their bodies, minds, and spirits—while they are yet unformed, he hopes to mould them the better to his particular services.

Some will be apt to make the inquiry—when young I used to make it myself—how are we to know when Satan is attempting to lure us—to fill our hearts, as he did the heart of Ananias—or to poison our minds, and excite unduly or distemper our bodies? How are we to distinguish between his temptations, and the perverse inclinations of our own bosoms?

My reply to such inquiries as these is, that I do not know, in the first place, that it makes any practical difference whether the temptation,

when we are tempted, comes from without or from within, whether it is the device of Satan, or the perverse movement of our own hearts. If we feel a desire to do that which we know to be wrong, there is always a possibility that Satan may have something to do with it.

Satan, who is a spirit, contrives, no doubt, to work with our spirits. When we take the first thought, or the first step, in wrong, Satan, or some one of his tribe, is at hand to help us on still deeper into that wrong thinking, or wrong acting. Just as when we have a good thought, or determine on a good action, God, or some good spirit of his, is ever ready to help us forward in that way.

True it is, we cannot always tell how far our evil thoughts, evil desires,

or evil actions, are our own, and how far they are the doing of Satan; but it may not be important that we should know. Indeed, it is very possible that Satan sometimes does his work not so much by putting any *new thoughts* or *desires* into our minds or our hearts, as by strengthening our own. In the case of Ananias it is by no means certain that any new thought or new feeling was presented or suggested by Satan. Perhaps he only acted in such a way as to excite or urge him on to do that which he was already strongly inclined to do.

One thing at any rate we may be sure of, whether we are young or old, it is, that there is no safety in thinking, speaking, or doing wrong, no not for a single moment. We should, from the first, resist it. Then, whether or

not Satan is concerned in it, we are safe; at least if we resist strongly enough. Strong as Satan may be, and no doubt is, he has no power to compel us to do wrong against our strong determination not to do it. Resist the devil, and he will flee. Resist evil thoughts, whether Satan is helping the matter on or not, and they will soon disappear. Or if we find them getting too strong for us, we may and should pray for divine aid in the contest. The Spirit of God, by himself, or by some angel or spirit whom he deputes for that purpose, is always ready to succour or assist those who are tempted. "Ask and ye shall receive."

## CHAPTER XI.

## EFFECTS OF THE PUNISHMENT OF ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA.

WE are told that great fear came upon all who heard the sad story of Ananias and his sudden death. And then, when his wife was struck down in the same manner, the same statement is repeated with additions: "And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things."

There are two sorts of fear. One may be called a good fear, and the other a bad fear. One is the fear of God; the other is a slavish or wicked fear, a fear of evil or punishment.

With some among us, I know it is becoming fashionable to contemn fear altogether. They think its influence

in every instance is injurious. They even quote Scripture in defence of their opinions. They say that "fear hath torment," and that the world has been under the influence of fear quite too long already. It is high time that it should be governed by love, as the Creator intended. It is high time that punishment, and the fear of punishment, were abandoned.

Now there is something very specious in all this, especially as it strikes the young and inexperienced. At any rate, it struck me very pleasantly when I was young. Indeed, I am not sure but its very speciousness deceives some older people, especially those who advocate the doctrine.

I have said that there are two sorts of fear, a good and a bad sort. The latter I am even now willing should

be cast off, whether by love or in some other way. It never did much good, I fear. I mean now a mere dread of evil, on account of the evil itself. This is what I call a slavish fear.

But there is in the world, sometimes mingled with the other sort of fear, sometimes by itself, a fear of offending those whom we love. This fear is quite a different thing, so it seems to me, from the mere dread of pain. A child should fear to offend a good parent, whether the parent will be likely to punish him or not. In like manner we should all fear to offend God; not merely because he can punish us, as he did Ananias, and because he probably will do it; but because he is lovely as well as just, and because we are unwilling to give him pain by our ill conduct.

The fear which fell upon the early church when they heard of the fall and punishment of Ananias and Sapphira—whether wholly of the latter sort, or partly of that and partly of the other—was, I have no doubt, greatly needed, and greatly salutary. They saw by it how holy God was, and how fixed he was in his determination to put down sin, and keep under and overthrow Satan. It led them to greater care and watchfulness, lest, like Judas, and Ananias and Sapphira, they should themselves fall away, and dishonour God and his cause, and bring upon themselves his displeasure in some form or other.

As to the fear which fell upon the world beyond or out of the church, the five thousand, it is more doubtful as to its good effects. Perhaps there

are some to whom the fear of a terrible bodily punishment, if they cannot be brought to a higher and nobler fear, is quite useful and salutary. Perhaps there would be more Judases and Ananiases than there now are, were it not for its influence. I mean, rather, that there might be in the world more outbreakings of an evil heart, were it not for this fear. Judas was a bad man, and had long been so—a lover of money—before he betrayed the Saviour. So with Ananias. He was an avaricious man long before he undertook to lie to the Holy Spirit of God.

In conclusion, let us all endeavour to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. I do not believe we are any of us likely to be injured by the fear of offending God, or even

of suffering the just punishment of breaking and trampling upon his holy laws. Let us not be high-minded, but humble, fearful, careful, watchful. Let us look out against the first steps in wrong, whether of wrong thinking, speaking, or acting. These are the points at which we should set the strongest and most effective guard. Let us fear lest Satan be found, here, above all, filling our hearts to cause us to sin like Ananias, if not to go like him to sure, swift, and terrible destruction.

THE END.









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